

Minutes
Community Voices/Budget Choices Facilitation Committee
June 19, 2008

The committee met at the Superintendent's Conference Room, Amherst Regional Middle School. The meeting was called to order at 9:10 a.m.

Alison Donta-Venman, Martha Hanner, Jerry Jolly, and Richard Spurgin were present from the committee, as was Andrew Steinberg, Budget Coordinating Group liaison to the committee.

John Musante (Assistant Town Manager and Finance Director), Jere Hochman (Superintendent of Schools) and Rod Wright (Unicom-ARC) were also present.

Because there was no quorum present, the committee did not conduct any business but heard a presentation from Wright.

Steinberg asked how long a process like this one normally requires. Wright said that he has seen a broad range, but that it depends upon the time that is available and the size of the gap, how ready the community is to meet the needs. He stressed the importance of communications and assuring that there is real representation from the community.

He gave an overview of community engagement, which needs some type of public opinion research to find out what the community values and public relationships. He made the following basic points:

- Communities are cynical of change that is top-down. They won't accept a recommendation about schools because the Superintendent or School Committee says so.
- Communities cannot support what they do not understand.
- Citizens lack access to reliable information about what is working, what is broken, and why.

Community engagement works because:

- Public permission is needed for meaningful change.
- The public won't support what they don't understand.
- The public is resistant to top-down approaches.
- Discovery is more powerful than persuasion.
- It is a powerful communications tool.
- It builds an army to support implementation.

The key outcomes desired for a process include:

- Internal and external unity
- A bulletproof plan – what and how
- Committed volunteers
- Public permission for meaningful change

A successful community engagement process (how) involves:

- A large number of people (There were questions about how this is defined. The answer seemed to be in the perception that a large number are involved rather than in a specific number or percentage.)
- Meaningful dialogue resulting in consensus
- Internal acceptance, support, and communication
- Citizen leadership
- Involvement of more than the usual suspects
- An open process
- True dialogue, two-way communications
- Comprehensive timeline and planning syllabus
- Data/information driven

Wright then described best practices for a community engagement process:

- Meetings and event workshops need to be well organized and planned.
- Engagement events should include small group work sessions and one-on-one activities.
- Documentation of information and consensus points.

Wright suggested that a web site and written materials anticipate likely questions and provide answers so that if questions arise during a presentation or meeting, she/he can be referred to the answer. This allows meetings to achieve their purpose.

Wright described an effort of Harper College, a community college in Illinois, to explain its needs and achieve consensus about its plans. He showed a video they developed as part of their work and provided the web site for the planning effort, which includes the video, <http://www.pathtoharper.com>. Musante remarked that this committee and process are not intended to advocate a result.

Wright described that process as one model to consider. It is similar to the presentation he made to the Budget Coordinating Group and is basically what the BCG recommended to the Select Board. After the development of options, they had three groups that focused on communications, outreach, and canvassing. Together, the three groups used various types of communication to reach the community, both to provide information and obtain feedback. They included forums, electronic means, and clip and mail forms. They created opportunities for input that was processed by a Facilitation Team and then finalized as recommendations to be presented to the college board.

In discussing communications, Wright suggested that it is important to begin by saying “we need your advice.” It is essential to use communications strategies that are appropriate for the community. Questions could include, “What option do you like?” and “What would you do to change the current public priorities?” He suggested that processes should use as many media options as possible.

He described a process in Lincolnshire, Illinois that developed five options. Many citizens didn’t pick one option. As an example, he said that someone might say I generally like option B but I like this element of option C and don’t see the need for this part of option B.

Wright responded to a question about planning the process. It is best to start by the end date and then plan backwards. He used as an example the need for a budget vote in April and how a planning process would be structured to meet that deadline within the available time.

A question was asked about public opinion research. He described a telephone survey that asked a sampling of citizens 60 questions. He said that you may reach different people through such a process than through public engagement. Wright was asked about the length of the survey, and said that people can be disarmed with an apology.

He described the roles of co-chairs in a process he developed. They were the visual representation of the process in the community and ran the meetings. With support, their work was not much more than for other members of the team.

He shared some of his model materials and outlines. The Facilitation Committee thanked Wright for his presentation.

The meeting adjourned at 11:10 a.m.

Andrew Steinberg, acting clerk